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FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFATT

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SUBJECT: ROYG ISSUES BLACKLIST OF SA'ADA ARMS TRAFFICKERS

Classified By: CDA Angie Bryan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. On October 5, the ROYG announced that seven Yemeni arms dealers had been "blacklisted," among them international arms trafficker Faris Manna, chief mediator between the ROYG and the Houthi rebels and brother of Sa'ada governor Hassan Manna. While theories regarding what prompted the blacklist vary, most observers agree that it does not signal a serious attempt to prosecute those implicated. Instead, analysts believe President Saleh is using the blacklist, and the subsequent arrest of three other arms dealers accused of supplying the Houthis, to warn the men that they can no longer supply both sides in the Sa'ada war. END SUMMARY.

BLACKLISTED ARMS DEALERS

12. (SBU) On October 6, official newspaper al-Thawra published a ROYG "blacklist" of Yemeni arms dealers. Upon issuing the blacklist, the ROYG warned against importing weapons and ammunition and dealing with the blacklisted arms dealers, announcing that violators would be punished. The ROYG did not, however, explicitly say that the blacklisted arms dealers would be arrested or prosecuted. Topping the list was notorious arms dealer Faris Manna, also the chief mediator between the ROYG and the Houthi rebels and brother of Sa'ada governor Hassan Manna. (Note: We have seen no indication that Manna has been removed from the Sa'ada mediation committee. End Note.) The other blacklisted arms dealers are Abdullah bin Maeli, Jarman Mohamed Jarman, Ahmed Awadh Abu Maska, Hussein Ahmed al-Huthaili, Abdullah Mubarak al-Sagheer and Ali Daifullah al-Sawadi. Journalist Nasser al-Rabyee of Gulf News said that the seven men are among the main arms dealers and importers of weapons for the Ministry of Defense. He said Manna in particular is close to both the government and the Houthis. Most of the men are identified as tribal sheikhs from Sa'ada governorate or with businesses there. Jarman is reportedly the brother of an army commander who was killed in the Sa'ada war. Abu-Maska is a businessman with several companies in Sa'ada and Sana'a, including rigs used for digging private water wells. Maeli is a Member of Parliament and sheikh from Marib governorate; as an MP he has immunity from prosecution.

ILLEGAL WEAPONS SHIPMENT SEIZED

13. (C) Some observers are linking the blacklist to reports that ROYG seized a large shipment of Chinese-origin weapons and ammunition in Hudaydah. Ruling General People's Congress (GPC) newspaper al-Mithaq reported on October 4 that traffickers attempted to use forged official documents to smuggle the shipment into the country and that "those involved are being interrogated and will be tried soon." Nabil Khamery, a businessman and close confidant of President Saleh and his son Ahmed Ali, told EconOff on October 10 that

the seized shipment was destined for Faris Manna. According to Khamery, Manna was angry about the seizure and met with President Saleh to ask him to allow the shipment to pass, but Saleh refused.

POSSIBLE LINK TO FIGHTER JET CRASHES

¶4. (S/REL TO USA, ACGU) The blacklist's publication may also be linked to the recent downing of ROYG aircraft, at least one of which may have been brought down by Houthi anti-aircraft fire. (Note: A Yemeni Air Force (YAF) Sukhoi fighter crashed on October 5 and a MiG fighter crashed on September 30. End Note.) According to NDI's Zafir, the Houthis obtained anti-aircraft guns as a result of a deal Faris Manna struck with them to end their 17-day siege of soldiers from the 105th brigade in Sa'ada in late August. According to the terms of the deal, all of the soldiers were released along with their personal weapons, but the Houthis kept the soldiers' tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft guns, and other heavy weapons. The Yemen Post and the Houthis' website al-Minbar both reported on the incident, though neither identified Manna as the dealmaker. The Houthis claimed that the soldiers "left behind seven tanks, a lot of heavy artillery and machine guns, and countless ammunition and supplies." Whether or not the Houthis used anti-aircraft guns secured during that incident, other battlefield captures, or blackmarket purchase to down the Sukhoi or the MiG is unclear. Nevertheless, Saleh is reportedly very angry at Manna for negotiating a deal that favored the Houthis and allowed them to obtain heavy weaponry that could later be used against the ROYG. (Note: DAO reports that a senior Yemeni military officer believes that the Houthis most likely shot down the SU-22 fighter with 23mm anti-aircraft artillery guns. DAO assesses that the MiG-21 that crashed on October 2 was a result of pilot error. End Note.)

BLACKLIST MEANT AS A MESSAGE

¶5. (C) Most observers do not perceive the blacklist as a serious attempt to crack down on illicit arms trafficking in Yemen. Gavin Hales, a Sana'a-based researcher for the Small Arms Survey, told PolOff that "this may be a political move to marginalize or eliminate certain individuals" who have fallen out of Saleh's favor. Zafir agreed, telling PolOff on October 6 that the arms blacklist was "another game" by President Saleh. According to Zafir, "Saleh is making it harder for them to do business through the military," which is the end user for all weapons imported into Yemen. "But is he going to go after them? Is he going to catch them, put them in jail, take them to court? No." Journalist Rabyee agreed that the blacklist is "just a statement" that is not likely to be acted upon. Instead, he thought the blacklist was President Saleh's way of telling those particular dealers -- who supply weapons to the Houthis as well as the military -- that "they have limits and need to stay in line." He said no legal action has been taken against them, their licenses have not been revoked, and they are still working to import arms for the military.

THREE ARMS DEALERS ARRESTED

¶6. (C) The Yemen Post reported on October 9 that three arms dealers were arrested while attempting to supply the Houthis with weapons and ammunition. Because their names were not disclosed, it is not clear if they were on the blacklist. (Comment: It is unlikely that they were on the blacklist, however, because the ROYG would have publicized that fact. End Comment.) Rabyee said that the arrest was, like the blacklist, meant as a warning to the seven blacklisted dealers, to show them that the ROYG is serious about stopping weapons supplies to the Houthis. NDI's Zafir told PolOff on October 10 that one of the arrested men was Northwest Regional Commander Ali Muhsin's driver. Muhsin has been accused of supplying arms to both sides in the Sa'ada war. (Note: Neither Muhsin nor his driver are on the blacklist.)

End Note.)

COMMENT

17. (S) The blacklist's timing -- immediately after the October 5 Sukhoi crash and just days after the weapons seizure in Hudaydah -- suggests that either incident, or both, could have prompted Saleh to issue the blacklist. They ROYG may also be responding to recent pressure from the USG to take action against arms traffickers or is attempting to impress its recent visitors from Egypt, the Arab League, and the UN with high-profile actions against persons responsible for fueling the conflict in Sa'ada. Regardless, the blacklist appears to be a warning to important arms dealers who have fallen out of favor with the government for supplying both sides in the war, rather than a signal of the ROYG's intent to arrest and prosecute them. The ROYG has not revoked their licenses or charged them with any crimes, despite publicly proclaiming that the men have broken the law. END COMMENT.

BRYAN